Childhood Disability: Five Decades of Action

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was created in 1946 "for the benefit of children and adolescents of countries which were victims of aggression [in the Second World War]". Although emergency feeding and health services were its initial priorities, UNICEF began to address the problems of massive childhood disability, an appalling heritage of the war in Europe. Working with other UN entities, UNICEF helped save many thousands of young people from permanent disabilities. In the 1960s and 1970s, UNICEF began to look at ways to prevent disability and to help disabled children within their own homes and communities. A special study conducted by Rehabilitation International (RI) found that at least one in every 10 children is born with or acquires a physical, mental or sensory impairment. In developing countries, where most of the world's disabled children live, little or nothing was being done to prevent childhood impairment or its damaging consequences.

The RI report concluded that the impairment of millions of children could be prevented or limited by simple measures which were potentially available within their families and communities. The focus should be not on the child's impairment but on the preservation and continuation of the normal process of his or her development. The effectiveness of any interventions should be measured in terms of their contribution to that development.

The report also determined that the general health, nutrition, education and social welfare services in which UNICEF cooperated should examine more closely the opportunities for prevention of impairments in children.

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Ongoing Preventive Measures

In 1982, the Child Survival and Development Revolution was launched, and UNICEF-sponsored programmes began training mothers and community workers in the early identification of impairments and the prevention of disabilities among children. These programmes emphasized primary health care and immunization as well as the rehabilitation of disabled children.

UNICEF-supported maternal/child health-care programmes further helped to prevent childhood disabilities. By providing mothers with prenatal care and care at birth, these programmes helped to lower the occurrence of birth defects, and of birth-related accidents and trauma among the newborn. Anti-leprosy and anti-trachoma campaigns, as well as immunization against polio, helped lower the rate of disabling diseases. Nutrition and rehabilitation programmes for young children helped prevent malnutrition and vitamin A- and iodine-deficiency disorders.

Expanded UNICEF Strategy

Based on the Rehabilitation International report, a new strategy for the care of children with disabilities was adopted by UNICEF in May 1980. Three essential elements are key to the strategy: effective prevention of childhood impairments, particularly those due to inadequate nutrition; early detection and intervention measures; and use of the family and the community as a primary vehicle for service delivery to disabled children.

During the UN Decade of Disabled Persons, UNICEF-assisted country-level programmes on childhood disability prevention and rehabilitation have expanded. One of the reasons for this is heightened governmental awareness and commitment following promotional activities during the International Year of Disabled Persons and the UN Decade.

This article is reprinted from the new United Nations publication entitled *The United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons: A Decade of Accomplishment (1983—1992).*

UNICEF has increased its inter-agency collaboration, in particular with CSDHA on disability policy, UNDP on disability prevention, WHO on community-based rehabilitation, UNESCO on special education needs of disabled children and ILO on vocational training for disabled women. The agency has increased staff orientation and information materials on childhood disability issues.

Since 1980, UNICEF has continued to maintain a technical support programme with Rehabilitation International to oversee the implementation of UNICEF's strategy on childhood disability.

Relief and Rehabilitation of Traumatized Children in War Situations

In 1989 the RI/UNICEF programme conducted a review of the physical rehabilitation needs of children and women victims of armed conflict, particularly those affected by the conflicts in the 1980s. To assess the extent and types of physical trauma among such children and women, paediatric orthopaedic specialists visited sites in Angola, El Salvador, Mozambique and Nicaragua as well as disabled Afghans living in refugee camps in Pakistan. The consultants examined the activities and assistance being provided through several international and non-governmental organizations.

A review of the RI/UNICEF study revealed that for every child killed, three more are wounded, permanently disabled or psychologically scarred for life by the trauma of war. War has an all-embracing impact on a child's development—attitudes, relationship to people and society, moral values and the mental framework for understanding society and life itself.

Many children express feelings of sadness and anxiety and demonstrate behavioural disorders of various levels of intensity. The psycho-social needs of these children are significant and demand care.

UNICEF has been giving special attention to the relief and rehabilitation of traumatized children in war situations. Examples of UNICEF initiatives are: "Days of Tranquillity" in El Salvador, "Education for Peace" in Lebanon and "Corridors of Peace" in the Sudan. These programmes are organized to protect children affected by war, to enhance their knowledge, skills and values and to improve their quality of life.

UNICEF Strategies for Children in the 1990s

At the first World Summit for Children, the largest such gathering in history, heads of 71 States and Governments made a great promise to the children of the 1990s: to try to end child deaths and child malnutrition, and to provide basic protection for the normal physical and mental development of all the world's children by the year 2000. This overall goal was broken down into the following specific objectives:

- To reduce mortality rates for infants and children under five by one third, or to 50 and 70 per 1,000 live births, respectively, whichever is less;
- To reduce the maternal mortality rate by one half;
- To reduce severe and moderate malnutrition among children under five by one half;
- To provide universal access to safe drinking water and sanitary means of excreta disposal;
- To provide universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80 per cent of children of primary school age;
- To reduce the adult illiteracy rate to at least one half of its 1990 level, with emphasis on female literacy;
- To improve protection of children, including disabled children, especially those in difficult circumstances.

In 1989, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This Convention sets standards for child survival, health and education, as well as specific goals for protecting all children in difficult circumstances around the world.

To keep these promises to disabled children and their families, UNICEF is now organizing and coordinating the UN Task Force on Disabled Children and Women. In close cooperation with Task Force members, UNICEF will assist with the development, implementation and monitoring of strategies for the prevention of disability, early detection of impairments, and improvements in the quality of life of children who are disabled.

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